

December 4, 2014

Testimony: H.B. 5958 *Religious Freedom Restoration Act*

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this issue.

My name is Susan Grettenberger and I am speaking in opposition to H.B. 5958, commonly referred to as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. I am a licensed social worker, a professor and director of the social work program at Central Michigan University, and the Vice President of Social Policy for the National Association of Social Workers, Michigan Chapter (NASW-Michigan). Today, I am speaking on behalf of NASW-Michigan.

H.B. 5958 violates social work professional requirements and has the potential to harm many people, including clients who rely on the services of unbiased and objective social workers. It would allow a social worker to legally refuse to serve people based on that social worker's religious beliefs, regardless of the immediacy of need or intensity of crisis of the person seeking services.

The profession of social work holds to a Code of Ethics, which states that we, as a profession serving the needs of vulnerable, at risk and marginalized populations, will respect and support the ability of people to have self-determination. This includes access to needed services. Explicitly, the Code of Ethics prohibits social workers from practicing, condoning, facilitating or collaborating with any form of discrimination on the basis of many characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability (4.02, NASW Code of Ethics, attached). Further, all social workers are directed to act to prevent discrimination against any person based on these same characteristics (6.04, NASW Code of Ethics). Social Workers are duty-bound to not discriminate in their practice and to actively work to prevent discrimination.

This proposal would suggest that social workers have the right to violate the profession's ethical obligations, which are the values agreed upon by the profession nationally. Michigan's licensure law, similar to social work license laws nationwide, requires adherence to a standard of inclusion and cultural competency; standards linked to the Code of Ethics. Therefore, refusal to provide service to specific clients would put social workers at risk of violating our profession's licensure laws and expectations.

While on its face, HB5958 allows individuals to act on their own beliefs, in practice it would create a great harm to society, as social workers are the providers of many public services in the areas of child welfare, mental health, public safety, corrections, substance abuse, domestic violence, and more. For instance, social workers opposed to war on religious grounds could

refuse to serve military families. Child welfare workers, and potentially whole agencies, could refuse to serve families, or even foster children, who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. Social workers whose religious beliefs exclude the use of alcohol could refuse a client in need of help with addiction. These points, though extreme, illustrate that clients in need of services could be harmed by this act.

The Governor and Lt. Governor have devoted considerable time, energy and money, through the Mental Health and Wellness Commission and its subsequent report, to find ways of increasing access to mental health services. HB5958 would regress that by reducing access to service. Reducing services to vulnerable populations, such as those affected by mental health challenges, poses a human risk to the person who does not receive services and even a public health risk for people who are under threat of violence of committing violence or self-harm due to mental illness.

This proposal also troubles me as a social work educator. In accordance with the profession's mission to serve all vulnerable populations and its Code of Ethics, social work program accreditation standards require us to teach all students to serve all populations and to practice in a nondiscriminatory manner. HB5958 contradicts those standards and would leave social work programs across the state at risk of losing accreditation. Agencies could refuse to work with students who are LGBT. Social service agencies may receive interns who refuse to work with specific populations, jeopardizing the agency, threatening the university social work program's accreditation, and harming clients.

One might argue that in the case of one worker's refusal to service a client, services could be provided by another person. This is frequently not an option. Often, program workers are overburdened and unable to absorb additional clients. Other workers at an agency may share those religious values, particularly in an organization that is faith-based and hires within the faith. In Michigan's many rural areas, often there are very few or even only one social worker for a given service. The refusal to serve a client would functionally remove services, often publicly funded, from those clients.

From a professional standpoint, a Code of Ethics standpoint, a licensure standpoint, an educational and National accreditation standpoint, and a human standpoint, NASW-Michigan opposes HB 5958.

I thank the committee for their time and I welcome any questions you may have.



Code of Ethics in English Code of Ethics in Spanish

**Code of Ethics
of the National Association of Social Workers**

Approved by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 2008 NASW Delegate Assembly

The 2008 NASW Delegate Assembly approved the following revisions to the NASW Code of Ethics:

1.05 Cultural Competence and Social Diversity

(c) Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

2.01 Respect

(a) Social workers should treat colleagues with respect and should represent accurately and fairly the qualifications, views, and obligations of colleagues.

(b) Social workers should avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues in communications with clients or with other professionals. Unwarranted negative criticism may include demeaning comments that refer to colleagues' level of competence or to individuals' attributes such as race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

4.02 Discrimination

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.

6.04 Social and Political Action

(d) Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical disability.

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Preamble

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context

